

Gina Bechelany*

PIECING TOGETHER

Piecing together their stories, women and children make a blanket that keeps them safe from violence. At the same time, through art, weaving, and embroidering, they defy injustice. Taking fabric scraps from here and there, small hands and expert hands piece together a relationship based on respect and understanding for women who have faced violence. Through the act of sewing and embroidering, the Healing Blanket strengthens ties among women, while the act itself yields a public space to raise and rekindle the voices of women against violence. Here, we present a conversation with the blanket's creator, Marietta Bernstorff, an artist, curator, and promoter of innovative projects bridging art with a number of societal issues.

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Photos courtesy of the Photographers' Collective and the Patchwork Healing Blanket/*La manta de curación* project.



Jazmín Andrade



Gina Bechelany: To what degree has the Healing Blanket helped cast light on the problem of violence against women?

Marietta Bernstorff: With this project, every woman is transformed into an advocate for change, and she can see the power of art and her visual voice as a tool against violence. This makes our cry ring louder: ¡Ya basta! Stop now! Stop the violence against all beings and against Mother Earth. Everything is connected, and understanding that is important to our future.

GB: Would you argue that this is a space for spiritual healing? How are dialogue and healing spawned in diverse communities?

MB: When we all come together to work on this project, healing emerges through the meditation that stems from creating a piece for another woman. For every piece, we tell a visual story birthed in the soul of each woman. In doing so, something powerful fills the room, and this can happen virtually, too. We're building a community and sharing our stories, and that makes us stronger. Many women have written to me to tell me how they've felt while

making patchwork pieces. It's very spiritual! It's more powerful than violence! It's a healing transformation that every woman feels when, at the end of it all, she sees all the blankets together.

I don't have a formula for this kind of activism. It's something far older, a power coming from within all women. We can feel it if we really tap into that level of intuition we have as women. This intuition is almost psychic, which is probably why men are afraid of women and call us witches. I think it's possible for all of us to heal, but it gets very hard when our processes are hindered by religious dogmas, social status, or, worse still, by targeting other women due to jealousy, competition, or racism. We have to unlearn so many things that we've been taught as women, including our relationship to men and power!

GB: Do you believe this social art project can evolve to become a subversive political movement?

MB: Yes. This massive work of public art, Patchwork Healing Blanket/*La manta de curación*, is a platform for women's transformation at a global level. First of all, we transform ourselves,

our inner selves, and then we become that force that's as old as the planet and the cosmos.

Being listened to isn't enough to change violence in the world. To change this madness, first, we need to listen to ourselves, understand ourselves, and help ourselves mutually as women of all cultures and social classes. Only then can our cries ring louder, for all women and for Mother Earth.

Then, we'll join forces with our sisters all over the world, because this violence against women, children, and Mother Earth is ubiquitous—and growing!

There's a union and strength we women all have inside us. You can feel it, right? As a woman, there's something we can't describe, a deep energy we all have. You can feel it. Something happens, and that's when we reach enlightenment as women together, as a reaction that art awakens inside us: the knowledge that not everything in this world is material. You can feel something more spiritual when you look at the art pieces by all these women, whose ages range from six to seventy-five.

Violence against women has been accepted and even tolerated throughout history. Many feminists argue that it's the product of a deeply entrenched patriarchal culture that promotes and rewards male domination. They posit that, in our patriarchal culture, men are more prone to use violence to maintain their dominant positions.

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This idea is probably correct, but I don't blame men—that would give them too much power. We give them that power. We women make up half of the global population. Why should we give them our power? It's just that we are partially responsible for this madness. We forget our own strengths, and, sometimes, we misuse them. We raise these men. We're their grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters, daughters, wives, and lovers, so why do we give them so much power over us? We have to start by undoing those patriarchal societies in our countries, cities, communities, and among ourselves as women. We have to educate girls and boys on new ideas on the roles of women and men, with kindness for one another and respect for our differences, joining forces so that, one day, we might save this planet we're all currently destroying. We have to stop blaming everything on men or women; we are a part of this human history, and we can change it if we want.



Reina Lizeth Hernández Millán

GB: But why through art?

MB: Art is a way of seeing, feeling, and experiencing life. It's a much greater force than other, destructive forces. Art enters one's soul, and other people's souls, and remains in our unconscious memory for generations. It's a non-violent way of creating communities of tolerance for each other.

Some might call it a revolution, but it started very long ago, not with this art project or with others happening in the world, created by women who use textile art, embroidery, painting, and other mediums. We, the women artists, writers, curators, activists, historians, homemakers, students, grandmothers, etc., are taking up what other women have shared for centuries: their dreams, their art, and their memories of having fought for women to rise up and fight against this violence.

GB: Personally, what lessons can you take with you from this community embroidery? Did it meet your expectations? What's your perspective, now that the project has progressed so much from

when you started the idea until now that you have more than 600 pieces?

MB: Many years ago, when I was in school, I read something by the writer James Baldwin, and it stuck in my mind: "The victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim: he or she has become a threat." The idea is that women rising up and expressing themselves through art, against something in their personal histories, or simply to help women defend themselves, is enough.

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GB: What's next for Marietta and the Women Embroiders of Time?

MB: This project has been developing over the years, and the more community art projects I take on with women, the more clearly I see things. I'm merely a builder of bridges because I can see that, if we join forces, we can accomplish anything. So I have to keep going for the future generations, the ones that will have to finish this Patchwork Healing Blanket/*La manta de curación*.

The Embroiders of Time project was born after the Patchwork Healing Blanket/*La manta de curación*. It emerged when we were together at the House of Time, while working on the patchwork blankets. The energy was good, so we came up with another project for women embroidering, with its own mission and destiny as a collective. As I mentioned, many women's art collectives have been cropping up, and we hope to invite all of them to our new virtual conversation platform on the Patchwork Healing Blanket/*La manta de curación* on Facebook and YouTube, until we might meet again and continue our mission to bring our blankets to every city and country, visiting women around the world to talk and join forces so that we might put a stop to this shadow pandemic, as the United Nations has called it. **MM**



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